

Meeting Brother Andrew

Matt Vaughan meets Anne van der Bijl, known in the West as Brother Andrew, and learns about Islam, Christianity, and chatting to the Taliban.

It's safe to say that Brother Andrew is not a man who is afraid of a challenge.

After all, 79-year-old men generally don't spend their time flying to Afghanistan to meet the Taliban, nor to Gaza to meet the leadership of Islamic Jihad and Hamas. After his exploits smuggling Bibles into Communist countries in the back of his VW Beetle became widely known – his book "God's Smuggler" has sold more than ten million copies in over forty languages – he has focused his considerable energies on the Muslim world. Since 1968 he has travelled all over the Muslim world preaching the love

of Christ. This has even led him to meet with terrorists: various groups in Gaza and the West Bank, warlords in Lebanon, and, most recently, the Taliban. Clearly, this is not a man who is afraid of the dark.

Not many Christians have this radical a desire to meet terrorists; indeed, not many of us seem particularly keen on meeting ordinary Muslims at all. Too many Christians, when faced with the challenge of increasingly confident and vocal Muslim communities in the West, are retreating into fear and insularity, and it is this response that Andrew is so keen to challenge.

"Why are we filled with fear?" he asks me on a frosty February morning in Holland. "Because we are not filled

Brother Andrew at home in Holland



with faith! It's either the one or the other. With the resurgence of Islamic power in the world, proportionally, interest in Christianity is declining because of liberalism. Until we get the radical message of Jesus back into our preaching there is no hope. As we see our influence in ethics and in morals, decline, we see the other side rise in power and influence, and it scares us. So then, what do we do? We start shouting. But this is not a verbal battle, it is a spiritual battle".

When I ask him to compare his experience of Islam to his experience of Communism, he responds instantly: "I only see one enemy, and I only see one saviour. The enemy has one aim, and that is to stop the work of Christ. We have one aim, to advance the work of Christ". Then he pauses.

"We at Open Doors speak about the time of Communism as "the good old days of Communism". It was so easy. This new challenge is far worse". This difference, he says, is reflected in the tone of his books. "God's Smuggler is entertaining. But my last two books [Light Force and Secret Believers] are not entertaining any more. They force you to make up your mind. I have seen so many Muslims being baptised, and then some of them are killed soon afterwards. These are all people I know personally, and it causes me a lot of pain".

So how can Christians act? Andrew becomes very animated when I put this question to him. "So many Christians travel to countries where there are Muslims. They all go on pilgrimages to Israel, but who is going to Bethlehem? Who knows about the Bethlehem Bible College, which is the only evangelical Arab Bible school in

the whole world? How about the only evangelical hospital in Gaza, which has a \$3 million debt? People go on holiday to Morocco, to Tunisia, but they don't take Bibles, they don't meet Christians. I asked someone why they didn't bring Bibles with them and they said "We don't want to spoil our holiday"". He pauses for a moment and shakes his head. "I want people to get drawn in to the spiritual battle. I don't see Islam as a threat; I see it as a challenge. But if

we don't respond to the challenge, it will turn into a threat. "

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On a recent trip to Pakistan Andrew asked to speak at a local madrassah, insisting that he wanted to go to the most dangerous one around. So it was that this 79-year-old Dutchman stood up in front of students in the madrassah where Mullah Omar, the head of the Taliban, had studied, and preached the gospel. "The Taliban leader said to me "Andrew, consider this your second home. Bring more Bibles, bring more books, come back and speak to us about Jesus". I felt very honoured! And people wrote to me saying "What were you doing? This is a dangerous, evil place!". Well, that's exactly why I'm there. There's no reason why we should be paralysed by fear. These are lost people, and Jesus died for them".

Brother Andrew is convinced that the solution to the current tension between Christians and Muslims in many Western countries is a mass movement of ordinary Christians who will reach out to Muslims on a very basic and personal level. "Why are we falling into the trap of thinking we cannot reach Muslims? Don't we



know Muslims in our street? We don't have to "evangelise", just show them you care for them. That's where it begins, greeting them on the street". Perhaps this is one of the differences between Brother Andrew and many other renowned speakers on Islam: rather than seeing the presence of millions of Western Muslims as a threat, he sees it as an opportunity. For the first time in history, every Christian has the opportunity to relate to Muslims, rather than just those who work overseas. "Why talk about the big things "over there" when we don't do the little things here? The first message is that we can reach them. Then secondly, we have to do it. Just do it. That's my message".

Later that evening, as I waited at Schiphol airport for my flight back to England, I read of the assassination of a top Hezbollah commander in Damascus. An unpleasant person, no doubt – a terrorist and a murderer – but a broken, sinful human just like the rest of us. Jesus died for his sins just as he died for mine – shouldn't he have had a chance to hear that message before he died? Will we continue to put our trust in car bombs, bullets, and troop surges, or will we come to realise that God's love is vastly more powerful than any weapon we can produce? And so I fly back to England with the words "We can do it. We can do it" ringing in my ears. ■